Lafayette Historical Society NEWS Enlightening Our Community

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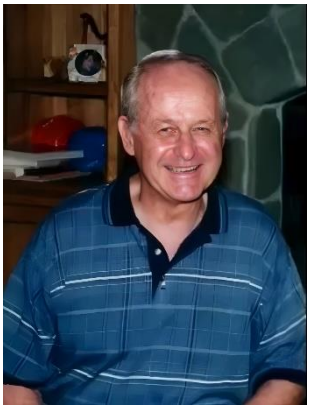
The Day Russell Bruzzone Saw It.....In the Rearview Mirror

How a hillside became Lafayette s Plaza Center:
Adapted from the oral history of Russell Bruzzone, as told to Oliver Hamlin



Russell Bruzzone wasn't looking for a shopping center.
He was just driving through town, like he had hundreds of times before—east on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, then south onto Moraga Road. But on that day, something made him glance in the rearview mirror.

And there it was.

Behind him loomed a hill, thick with eucalyptus trees, rising steeply above the surrounding terrain. He pulled over, stared at the slope, and started to laugh. "I must have passed that hill a thousand times and never seen it," he said. "But in that moment, it all came together."

What Russell saw in the mirror that day wasn't just a hill—it was potential. It would become the Lafayette Plaza Shopping Center, a landmark retail development that helped in reshaping our town's commercial core.

But first, he had to move a mountain.

200,000 yards of dirt, gone...

The hill next to Mt. Diablo Boulevard stood 65 feet tall and contained an estimated 200,000 cubic yards of dirt. Turning that

ridge into a flat, buildable lot would be a colossal task. Russell set out to buy up the parcels one by one: the largest from the Johnson family estate, others from the Torchio and Kitchen families. With the 7 acres of land assembled, the real work began. Russell bought trucks and equipment, partnering with his friend Tony Lobo to purchase a front-end loader. The only piece they didn't own was a massive bulldozer, which belonged to contractor Tony Lemos. Russell made him a deal: *he couldn t pay up front, but he d make good when the job was done*. Lemos agreed, no paperwork, just a handshake. For eighteen months, crews worked from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., seven days a week. The dirt had to go somewhere—and it did. Russell trucked it all over Contra Costa County:

- **To Concord, where it filled low-lying land at the area known as Four Corners, paving the way for another shopping center.**
- **To Stanley School, to help level out the athletic fields.**
- **To Happy Valley, where he filled a gully.**
- **And to countless other places, sometimes just giving the dirt away to anyone who would take it.**

"It was a long, long job," Russell recalled. "But every bit of that hillside got used."

By the end, he'd paid off Lemos—over $25,000, a significant sum in the early 1960's, equivalent to nearly $200,000 today. The entire project had started not with a plan or a blueprint, but a simple glance in a rearview mirror.

New Shopping Center Opening Set for Ju

ARCHITECT'S SKETCH SHOWS HOW LAFAYETTE'S NEW PLAZA CENTER WILL LOOK WHEN FINALLY COMPLETED.

7-Acre Plaza Center Will Have 20 Stores

THIS IS HOW THE AREA LOOKS NOW

Hearing on Lafayette Unification Plan Set

Fairview's Cage Carnival to Be Held Jan. 25

More Units Sought for Big Parade

Where a hill was leveled, a Plaza grew. What rose in place of the hill was the Plaza Center, a commercial heart for a growing town. But the foundation of it all—literally and figuratively—was that hillside. It took foresight, grit, and eighteen months of nonstop hauling to level it, culminating in the Plaza Center's grand opening in March 1964. It all began with a man who, in one quiet glance behind him, saw not just a hill—but the future of a growing town.

The Gateway to Lafayette Orchards: Welcoming Neighbors Home for 80 Years

Long before Lafayette's streets filled with carpools, evening dog walkers, and the quiet hum of modern life, a pair of white stucco gates rose at the edge of a brand-new neighborhood and quietly announced: *you re home*.

Built in 1946, the entry gates to Lafayette Orchards—marking the entrance to Willow Drive at Mt. Diablo Boulevard—signaled one of the community's earliest residential developments, a hopeful postwar moment when families were planting roots and imagining the future. Simple yet dignified, the gates were designed to do more than frame a roadway. They were meant to set a tone.

At the time, the *Lafayette Sun* described the Gateway as both functional and beautiful, its clean lines carefully chosen to conform to the surrounding landscape. By day, the

Mission-style structures stood solid and welcoming; by night, neon lighting illuminated the "Lafayette Orchards" signs, glowing softly to "show the way home." An automatic clock governed the lights, switching them on at just the right moments—an early touch of modern convenience wrapped in old-world charm.

Those gates quickly became part of daily life—and not just for schoolchildren. With the opening of the fall term in 1946, the Gateway served as a regular school bus stop, where kids gathered beneath the signs, lunch pails in hand, beginning ordinary days that would one day become cherished memories. It was also a place to catch the Greyhound bus: fathers heading off early to jobs in Oakland or San Francisco, mothers setting out on shopping excursions across the hills, and teenagers—full of independence and anticipation—bound for a Saturday matinee at the Paramount. The Gateway wasn't merely an entrance to a neighborhood; it was a launching point, where Lafayette residents stepped briefly out into the wider world before returning home again.

What makes the Gateway especially meaningful is how it came to be. The Lafayette Orchards Improvement Association—made up of residents and property owners within the development—raised the necessary funds through subscriptions. This was a true community effort, extending beyond the Gateway itself to address drainage, road maintenance, and other shared needs. Construction was handled by local contractor Paul Haller, while Wright Brothers Nursery generously contributed much of the landscaping materials and labor. Shrubs were planted at the base of the gates, softening the crisp white stucco and tying the structures to the land they guarded. The county would maintain the road beyond, but the Gateway belonged to the people who passed through it every day.

Architecturally, the Gateway embraced a rustic Mission or Spanish Colonial Revival style—two sturdy stucco pillars with flat, slightly overhanging caps and low flanking walls that gently defined the entrance. What many later mistook for simple medallions were, in fact, wagon wheels set into the design—an intentional nod to the area's rural past. One gate bore "LAFAYETTE," rendered in simple, stylized lettering; the other "ORCHARDS," the two words designed to be read at a glance by passing motorists.

Nearly two decades later, those beloved gates faced an unexpected threat. In the spring of 1964, without notice to residents, a county-approved bulldozer—acting on behalf of Blue Haven Pools—tore down the left-hand pillar to make way for sidewalks and curbs. Shrubs were uprooted, a stop sign toppled, and longtime residents were stunned. The permission granted for the work, it later emerged, had been *oral*, not written, despite the homeowners' original county authorization to build a permanent gateway. "There was a certain pride we all had in it," one homeowner recalled, echoing a sentiment widely shared throughout the neighborhood.

What followed was a brief but passionate civic battle. Homeowners organized, called the sheriff, and produced original county documents granting written permission for the permanent Gateway. Concern turned to alarm when residents learned that Dynamic Realtors, on the opposite corner, was planning similar "improvements" that could result in the removal of the remaining pillar. That news spurred immediate action. Petitions were circulated, hundreds of signatures gathered, and the controversy made headlines in the *Lafayette Sun*, where it was famously dubbed a "comedy of errors." Ultimately, the county acknowledged its role in the misunderstanding and agreed to restore what had been lost—at county expense—bringing the neighborhood's historic Gateway back from the brink.

The compromise that emerged reshaped the Gateway. While the pillars remained, the original wagon wheels were removed, and a central walk-through arch replaced the earlier configuration—explaining why today's design differs subtly from its 1946 appearance. Eighty years later, though altered by time and circumstance, the Gateway is still standing. It has watched generations come and go—children grow up, families expand, neighbors wave hello and goodbye. Cars may move faster now, and the neon no longer flickers on to guide residents home at dusk, but the feeling remains the same.

The Gateway to Lafayette Orchards isn't just an entrance. It's a reminder of a moment when a neighborhood came together to build something lasting—and of how, when that landmark was threatened, the community came together once again to save it. For eight decades and counting, the Gateway has quietly welcomed people home.

The Curious Case of Or-La-Mo

Long before *Lamorinda* rolled off tongues like a real estate buzzword, our tri-town territory flirted with a different identity: Or-La-Mo.

That's right—Orinda, Lafayette, and Moraga nearly went the route of a mid-century sci-fi planet or a canned meat substitute. It was March 1965, and tucked into the pages of the *Lafayette Sun* was a now-legendary announcement:

"Scout leaders of the Or-La-Mo District will pick up their Scout-o-rama kits at the Rheem Theater..."

That spring, local Scouts descended on the Miramonte High School gym for the annual Scout-o-rama, where they showed off booths, rode horses, and even staged a scuba demonstration (because if someone ever needed rescuing from the Lafayette Reservoir, Or-La-Mo Scouts would be prepared).

Ed Patterson of Orinda chaired the extravaganza and said the event would be packed with informative displays showing how "Scouting can help you and still be fun".

We've only ever found this one reference to the name, but for a brief, shining moment in 1965, the triad nearly had a name that sounded like a lost tiki drink.

So next time someone says Lamorinda sounds made up, just smile and say, "Well, it sure beats Or-La-Mo."

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2026

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

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Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. Donations are always appreciated.

Student Membership: $15 ~ Individual Membership: $30 ~ Family Membership: $60

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